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UNCLAS YEREVAN 000829

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/PPD

E.O. 12958; N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: RADIO LIBERTY MAY BE FORCED OFF THE AIR

(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The National Assembly appears poised to enact a pair of laws that seem aimed directly at forcing RFE/RL off the airwaves. One provision will block state radio from airing the broadcasts, while a companion amendment in another law will impose hefty taxes on any commercial broadcaster airing the program. We have reached out to the chairman of parliament's powerful State and Legal Affairs Committee with our concerns, and are trying to reach the president's chief of staff. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Programming from Radio Liberty might be forced off the air in Armenia if proposed amendments to the "Public Television and Radio" and "Stamp Duty" laws are approved by the parliament. Word of these draft amendments became public June 27. According to the proposed amendment to the law on "Public Television and Radio," the broadcast of foreign radio and TV channels through the use of public television and radio frequencies will be prohibited. The second amendment proposed to the law on "Stamp Duty" states that any foreign mass media transmitted by any Armenian radio and television station will require a payment of 70,000 Armenian drams (roughly USD 200) for each transmission -- a hefty fee in the Armenian context.

¶3. (SBU) Yerevan Press Club (YPC) Director Boris Navasardian told us that both amendments are directed specifically against Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). According to him, if the amendments to the law on "Public Television and Radio" pass, Radio Liberty will have to stop broadcasting on public radio and seek a private station to carry its programming. But Navasardian claims that this would prove extremely difficult because the proposed amendment to the law on "Stamp Duty" would prevent other radio stations from broadcasting Radio Liberty as no station would agree to pay 70,000 AMD for each transmission of Radio Liberty. The head of YPC stressed that if Radio Liberty followed its present schedule, then any radio station broadcasting its programming would have to pay approximately 25,000 USD per month for its transmission.

¶4. (SBU) Harry Tamrazian, the Director of RFE/RL Armenian Service based in Prague informed Embassy Yerevan that with these amendments, the Armenian government "is trying to deprive Armenian people of receiving full and unbiased information from the only reliable media outlet." Tamrazian stated that Radio Liberty presently uses both Public Radio as well as private/commercial frequencies ("Radio Hay" and "Ardzagank"). Tamrazian believed that the amendments would essentially force all foreign media out of Armenian inasmuch as the law on "Stamp Duty" would make it financially unviable for private radio stations to broadcast foreign media outlets.

¶5. (SBU) CDA e-mailed an inquiry, noting our concerns, to State and

Legal Affairs Committee chairman David Harutyunian, the former Justice Minister with whom we have worked very collegially in the past. CDA also reached out to presidential chief of staff Armen Gevorgian, but Gevorgian has yet to return the call.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) This law seems aimed exclusively at Radio Liberty. We are unaware of any other radio programming that would be affected. The action follows on several letters from Presidential Spokesman Victor Soghomian in which he complains of the anti-government "bias" of Radio Liberty's reporting. We will communicate to Armenian leaders that the United States would take a very dim view of Armenia's enacting legal provisions transparently aimed at shutting down Radio Liberty broadcasts.

GODFREY